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AUTHOR Povenmire, E. Kingsley
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ABSTRACT

The dynamics of verse can be tapped to serve individual readers at the elementary and secondary levels. Choral speaking, or any group speaking together, can eliminate the fear of failure for the lone reader. A verse choir can be organized to use pitch, power, phrasing, tempo, voice quality, and movement to interpret a piece of literature. Although statistical proof that speaking together encourages success in reading is elusive, the verse choir's atmosphere of confidence and unity are immeasurable benefits. More tangible results include an improvement in vocabulary, increased curiosity about the written word, improved speech skills, and a fuller understanding of the rhythm and meaning of poetry. (KS)

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THE VERSE CHOIR, A "BACK-DOOR APPROACH" TO READING AND LEARNING

A brief paper prepared for the Twenty-First Annual Convention of the International Reading Association held in Anaheim, California, May 10 - 14, 1976. By Professor Emeritus E. Kingsley Povenmire, Drama Department, San Diego State University, San Diego, California.

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Home Address: 8301-368 Mission Gorge Road
Santee, California 92071
(714) 448-5893

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THE VERSE CHOIR, A "BACK-DOOR APPROACH" TO READING AND LEARNING

A paper prepared for the Twenty-First Annual Convention of the International Reading Association held in Anaheim, California, May 10 - 14, 1976, by Professor Emeritus E. Kingsley Povenmire, San Diego State University, and author of "Choral Speaking and the Verse Choir", A. S. Barnes and Co., Cranbury, New Jersey 08512. (395 pages, $9.95.)

This brief paper will attempt to show how the dynamics of the verse choir can be tapped to serve individual readers. For the purpose of clarity may we agree on these two brief definitions:

"Choral Speaking" includes any group speaking together simultaneously. It could be a school assembly, a congregation, or a football crowd. For these groups their speaking is secondary to their essential purpose.

A "Verse Choir" is a speaking group, organized to use disciplines of the speech arts to advantage. It differs from choral speaking in that it is directed and its primary purpose is to interpret a piece of literature, by highlighting its thought and feeling.

A class, from pre-school through college, will function as a ready-made verse choir when the teacher directs its members to gain the most meaningful interpretation of the subject in hand. The class may be best adapted to the boy-girl grouping or to variations of the light, medium and dark speaking-voice groups. The latter operates best when individual voice differences become obvious. More effective interpretation is accomplished by the use of the seven variables; pitch, power, phrasing, tempo, voice quality, number of voices, and bodily movement.

However deeply the teacher wishes to go into these techniques is a matter of choice. The simplest treatment will serve the reading teacher well and will provide a relaxed atmosphere for the student, who will not be under the pressure of preparing a number for public performance. These four short success stories will serve as examples:

1. Two graduate students, Berner and Mershon, administered a verse choir project to their fourth-grade classes of slow readers. They each found a marked improvement in their pupils' ability to read and comprehend new materials after participating in the verse choir.
2. A teacher, Arthur Dan Willson, found himself to be the only person in his sixth-grade English classroom who could read. Putting the books aside he led the class in simple oral rhythms and poems. Their success in these, especially in pronouncing the words, sparked an interest in seeing the words in print, and in other subject matter. After several weeks of working with materials of graduated complexity many in the class were reading at grade level, and all of them were excited with their improved ability. Their work in other classes improved proportionately.
3. Moving to a Junior High School, Mr. Willson used the same "speak it first - read it when ready" approach with slow readers. Interest became so keen that many students returned to his verse choir classes during their study periods. His ninth-grade class was successful in performing the Ninth Book of Milton's "Paradise Lost" and T. S. Eliot's "Wasteland". Pride in their accomplishment was equal to that of an athletic victory.
4. One boy received an "A" grade for this work. Having been an under-achiever with a high IQ, this was his very first grade above his usual "D-C" performance. He asked if he had "earned the 'A' or did you just give it to me?" Mr. Willson reached up and pulled down a master stroke.

He said, "Don't take my word for it, go out and earn an 'A' in another course." Three of his four grades the next semester were "A's"!

Over a period of twenty-five years of teaching verse choir to college students and teachers-in-service reports of similar success experiences were legion. Often, participation in verse choir broke the log-jam of inertia and caused students to approach their potential in unrelated fields due to their increased ability to read and comprehend -- and because they became more interested in the world about them. There were other agents at work, but the verse choir was a positive catalyst.

Statistical proof that speaking together in a verse choir is a key that opens the door to success in reading is hard to come by. This is due to the fact that most of the gains are made by the supportive functions of such factors as confidence, sheer joy in self-expression with others and the removal of the threat of individual failure. These find themselves in the Affective Realm of education whose nebulous nature resists measurement.

But confidence is certainly a major foundation, and even necessity, in a child's first attempts to read. And confidence is nurtured as the threat of individual failure vanishes when the individual child becomes immersed in the combined effort of the group as all its members join in joyfully producing the sounds of the poem. The joy, or "fun", becomes the lubricant that changes a classroom from a place of stress and frustration to a comfortable arena where even faltering efforts are accepted, and encouragement to do better is built into the group speaking experience. A teacher would do well to choose poems that have simple structure and a light spirit for these early experiences. An Ohio State University professor once said, "There's room in this world for a whole lot of foolishness." Especially is this true when it serves such a valid educational purpose -- getting a child started on the road to reading.

Once confidence and emotional security have been established the stage is set for another ally to become active -- curiosity. "How do these words look in print?", "Why are they put together this way?", and "Who wrote them?", are among the questions that have been asked by pupils and reported by teachers. They are living proof that the child has become motivated and is responding to the comfortable environment with relaxed sensitivity to subjects outside himself, to the world around him, and is ready to follow the lead of the teacher into the next learning experience, be it another speaking or reading exercise.

Another inhabitant of "the world about him" is the person standing beside him in the verse choir. This may be an over-aggressive child who has given our retiring, lonely one a further feeling of inadequacy and failure in other circumstances. But now they are on an equal footing, each contributing his own best to the combined effort of the group. As this supports the retiring child it is also a gain for the aggressive one to see his companion in a new and different light, as one who is making a worthy contribution to the total experience. When this equalizing effect is multiplied by all the personal interrelationships in the class we see that the verse choir experience can even cause pupils to become interested in each others' performances as co-operators instead of competitors, as when only individual performance was the criterion for success. This mutual recognition and interest has developed an atmosphere of helpfulness in many classes, structured by teams of two who alternately read and listen to each other. A further result has been increased confidence, and ability, on the part of individual students as they are called on to read for the entire class -- now made up of friendly people interested in the reader's success.

While we are describing the optimum situation, the road to which is fraught with many disappointments, it should be encouraging to know that

these actual experiences have transpired in classrooms and were reported by the teachers involved. Indeed a total of twenty-seven such values have been reported as welcome supportive "fallouts" from the verse choir experience.

The Cognitive Realm of education provides more measurable results. Chief among these is the increase in vocabulary. Words become tools for self-expression and communication and are therefore "claimed" as personal property and become part of the child's personality; for one's speech is "the measure of the person." More formal measurement has shown vocabulary enrichment in two aspects. First, testing has proven the increase in the number of new words, the accuracy of their meaning, and the ability to spell them.

The second part of vocabulary enrichment is finding new meanings for known words. Thus when Robert Frost uses the term "downy flake" in his "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening", he assigns the soft quality of duck-down to the nearly imperceptible weight of a snowflake. Similarly his "dark and deep" woods now add a sense of mystery to mere absence of light. Children in primary grades have responded positively to these new concepts in assembly-sized groups. For older students Edgar Allan Poe's, "The Bells", and Vachel Lindsay's, "Johnny Appleseed", are especially rich in innovative uses of words that add several dimensions to their meanings, including onomatopoeia. True, we are now dealing with abstract and idiomatic concepts but we may be surprised at how early these can be introduced and how eagerly they may be received. They certainly will enrich the spoken word, and open up new vistas in reading experiences.

Other measurable values served by the verse choir include: improving all speech skills and their resultant effect on oral reading; filling the treasure-house of the mind with valued memories; meeting new authors in a vital and exciting manner, and exploring new subjects that have been sparked by the content of a poem. For instance, Langston Hughes' poignant poem, "The Negro

Speaks of Rivers", elicited these questions: "Where is this Euphrates River?"; "What kind of boats were used on the Nile and Congo Rivers?", and "What was Lincoln's early life really like?" These questions usher the student into the wondrous disciplines of geography, ancient history, river travel the world over, and early 19th Century America.

A further area of support for reading, enhanced by the verse choir, is that of bodily movement. From Thorndike's time we have known that movement, in any degree, that accompanies reading will impress the subject more deeply on the readers by providing a more complete experience. The verse choir experience invites accompanying movement; from fingerplays, through simple imitative actions of animals and phenomena of nature, through representation of abstract concepts, to complex choreographed dances. So, even the resources of the Psycho-Motor Realm of education are at our disposal.

The unique contribution the verse choir makes to movement, as well as to vocal expression, is in highlighting the rhythm of the piece. Rhythm is the fundamental beat that stems from the life situation about which the poem was written. It is the heart, the very essence, the oil that lubricates smooth performance -- and sometimes the glue that prevents the poem's fragmentation. Rhythm brings the reader and poem together in two ways: first by opening up the inner life of the poem; and second, by facilitating expression of its cargo of thought and feeling. It is much easier for a group to sense and be captured by the rhythm than for an individual reader, but once an individual has had the group experience his own reading will be more rhythmical and therefore closer to the heart of his subject.

So it is that the indirect, or "back-door", approach afforded by the verse choir encourages, reinforces and enhances the efforts of the individual reader by providing a relaxed arena to begin and further techniques to refine his efforts.

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